Down Meadow, Burwash Common
Management Plan – DRAFT

Site Characteristics

Down Meadow is located between the houses on the south side of Vicarage Road and the Westdown Park housing development off Westdown Lane and centres on the coordinates 50° 9.050'N 0° 20.250'E. It encompasses an area of approximately 0.53 ha (1.33 acres).

The site comprises an area of unmaintained grassland (approx. 80 %), peripheral scrub (approx. 10 %) and trees (approx. 10 %). Currently there appears to be no management of the site and the grassland is in the early stages of successional transition to scrub. Bracken has colonised a large proportion of the central area of grassland and brambles are encroaching from the periphery. It appears that most of the trees away from the boundary of the site are self-set. On, or near, the boundary a number of 'screening' conifers (?*Leylandii*) have been planted and these are now of considerable height and width.

A botanical survey of the site has not been undertaken and, therefore, the precise floral composition of the site is undocumented.

Objectives

Following the recent meeting at the Burwash Common Pavillion and discussions with Julian Kenny, the main objectives of the management of Down Meadow appear to be two-fold:

- ☐ to enhance the ecological value of the site in terms of resources for local wildlife and biodiversity holding capacity;

- ☐ maintain the area as a public amenity for the local residents and walkers.

In order to achieves objectives, a management plan is required that encourages plant and animal communities to establish whilst not entailing the exclusion of people or pets from the area.

Proposed Habitats

1. Wildflower Meadow Grassland.

Due to modern farming practices involving the fertilizing of livestock pastures, diverse wildflower meadow habitats have become extremely rare in the UK. However, in the Burwash area, we are very fortunate to have some excellent examples, including the Willingford Meadows SSSI. These meadows support a wide range of flowers and herbs which in turn provide food and refugia for a huge range of insects, including butterflies, moths, bees, beetles, grasshoppers, crickets and an inordinate number of other flies and bugs. The insects represent food resources for numerous 'higher' animals including bats, lizards, slow worms, frogs, toads, rodents and birds.

It is proposed that the open areas of Down Meadow be managed to enhance the establishment of wildflower meadow habitat.

2. Peripheral Scrub

Scrub and brambles provides refugia for a range of species including birds, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians. In addition, depending on the plant species present, scrub can provide a valuable source of autumn food in the form of fruit, seeds and berries.

It is proposed that small areas of peripheral scrub are retained and maintained.

3. Trees

A number of trees are present within the site, some as clumps or stands and a few isolated. Some species, most notably oak, provide habitat to a wide range of insects, a number of which are species specific, such as the oak gall wasp. Trees also provide roots and nesting sites for birds and are aesthetically pleasing.

It is proposed that the majority of the existing native trees are maintained.

Habitat Management

1. Wildflower Meadow Grassland.

Diverse wildflower meadows require nutrient poor soils that do not enable the more prolific grasses to dominate and outcompete less robust flower and herb species. Consequently, the management of flower meadows requires that no fertilizer or manure is introduced to the soil. Furthermore, the removal of the vegetative sward is necessary to reduce the nutrient content of the soil by preventing the nutrients bound within the grasses being 'recycled'. This is the reason traditional haymaking leads to the establishment and maintenance of wildflower meadows.

The open areas of Down Meadow are currently overgrown and are being colonised by invasive bracken. However, it is unlikely that the area has been artificially fertilized in recent years and, given the close proximity to excellent examples of diverse meadow habitats and communities, it is possible that wildflower meadow plants species will be present on the site already, albeit in a suppressed state.

In order for flowering plants and herbs to re-establish on the site, the bracken needs to be eliminated and the dominant grasses and 'weed' species need to be suppressed. A short vegetation sward is necessary in spring to allow any all existing species to grow, flower and set seed. The initial management of the grassland habitat should be as follows:

Immediate actions –

- ☐ Clearance of existing overgrown sward and removal of cuttings. To be undertaken as soon as possible, preferably before the plants die back for winter.

Years 1 and 2 (2019/2020) –

- ☐ Mow in early spring to reduce sward height. Remove cuttings.

- ☐ Maintain (mow) footpath route to prevent unintentional trampling of grassland

- ☐ Any bracken should be removed by hand or 'topped' using a scythe or strimmer. Continuous removal of the bracken fronds will cause the subsoil rhizomes to die back and the plant will be eradicated. However, this is a long term process and may take a number of years.

- ☐ Mow mid-late summer (mid-July/August) after the flora had set seed. Follow haymaking process by leaving cuttings to dry, turning regularly (daily) to allow seeds to drop. Once dry, remove cuttings.

Note: Ideally, the area would be used to produce hay by a local farmer on the understanding that the cut is made no earlier than mid-July and he/she can keep the hay. However, due to the small size of the site, this may not be financially viable and a fee may be charged to mow, dry and remove the hay.

After two years of the above mowing regime and assessment can be made as to the diversity of the grassland. It may then be considered necessary to undertake enhancement measures to improve the diversity of the grassland in order to maximise the ecological value of the site. Given the proximity of established, diverse wild flower meadow habitats, it is recommended that the application of green hay, collected locally, is undertaken. This process involves the cutting of hay from a donor wildflower meadow site and the immediate transfer to the receptor site, in this case Down Meadow. The attached information sheets provide detail the process.

Once wildflower meadow plant communities have established, the mowing regime outlined above should be continued to maintain the habitat and the plant and animals communities it supports.

2. Peripheral Scrub

Small areas of the existing peripheral scrub, including the brambles, dog roses etc, should be retained to increase the habitat heterogeneity of the site. However, these should be managed and cut back to prevent encroachment onto the areas of open grassland.

3. Trees

It is recommended that all non-native trees are removed from the site. This includes the large *Leylandii* conifers on the south eastern boundary. These occupy a large area of ground within which no ground story plants occur. Furthermore, they cause extensive shading of the site which will be detrimental to the establishment of wild flower meadow plant communities. If screening trees are wanted by the occupants of the adjacent properties alternative, native species should be selected. For example, holly (*Ilex aquifolium)* is evergreen, providing year-round screening and also provides a valuable food resource for resident bird species.

It is further recommended that consideration is given to removal of selected self-set trees and 'weed' tree species (e.g. willow) to maximise the grassland area and to reduce the shading of the wildflower meadow habitats.

4. Additional Ecological Enhancement Measures

A range of ecological enhancement measures could be instigated on the Down Meadow site. However, consideration must be given to the fact that the site has public access and will be disturbed by walkers and local residents. Therefore any measures not present any hazard to the public, must be robust and non-removable (or out of reach) and must not be compromised by disturbance. Furthermore, the site will be frequented by dogs and cats and, therefore, the encouragement of the vulnerable prey species (e.g. ground nesting birds, dormice) is not appropriate.

- ☐ **Log piles** – following the felling or pruning of trees, log pile can be positioned at selected locations within the site. These will provide habitat for a range of insects including beetles, and provide refugia for small mammals, reptiles and amphibians.

- ☐ **Reptile hiburnacula** – constructed simply by creating a trench filled with a layer rubble below logs and topped with the turf. These provide subterranean spaces for reptiles and amphibians to overwinter.

- ☐ **Bird and bat boxes** - located at suitable positions within the site, bat and bird boxes increase the holding capacity of the site for these species.